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ABSTRACT

In recent years the Dominican population has been the fastest growing ethnic population in New York City, now comprising the second largest Hispanic group. This study reviewed 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census of Population statistics to present a picture of the economic lives of Dominicans and suggest ways to improve their status. The income of Dominicans ranks among the lowest of New York City ethnic groups, and the poverty rate is among the highest. The changing economic environment in New York has hit Dominicans particularly hard. Educational attainment is one of the key factors determining success in the labor market. Improving the economic status of Dominicans in New York City will require a major investment in education. Improving general adult literacy and English language proficiency also is essential. In addition, job training and workplace apprenticeships can help direct persons in the labor force away from low-paying jobs in collapsing industries and toward employment in sectors that offer greater long-term opportunities. Increased access to higher education is essential for the Dominican population. Public policies that support the educational efforts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would be of great value. (SLD)

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The Socioeconomic Status of Dominican New Yorkers

In recent years the Dominican population has been the fastest growing ethnic population in New York City, and now comprises the second largest Hispanic group. Despite the increasing demographic significance of Dominicans, relatively little systematic information about them was collected and analyzed until the study summarized here was undertaken. This study, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile, 1990*, reviews 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census of Population data to present a picture of the economic lives of Dominicans and suggest ways to improve their status.

The income of Dominicans ranks among the lowest of the New York City ethnic groups covered in the study, including non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic African Americans, and overall Hispanic. The poverty rate of Dominican households is one of the highest, and nearly half the children lived below the poverty line in 1989. Largely responsible for such high poverty are the Dominican unemployment rate, which is close to double that of New Yorkers overall; and the average income of Dominicans, which is substantially below the overall New York average and a result of their predominant employment in blue collar and low-skilled jobs. The concentration of Dominican workers in the manufacturing industry, one of those most heavily hit by recent changing economic trends, further exacerbates their employment difficulties.

Dominicans, particularly immigrants, have low high school and college completion rates compared to other New Yorkers, although the gaps are slowly narrowing. Since the relationship between educational attainment and earnings is growing steadily closer, it is no surprise that Dominican New Yorkers have low income.

Despite some small gains by Dominicans in isolated areas of socioeconomic life, key indicators have not shown improvement for this group over the last decade. The changing economic environment in New York, which has negatively affected all low-income workers, has hit Dominicans especially hard. In order to improve the group's economic status, which can result mainly through employment in higher-skilled jobs, the Dominican population must be able to obtain greater access to higher education or to meaningful job training programs. Public policies must target this issue.

This Brief is based on a monograph, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile*, by Ramona Hernandez of LaGuardia Community College and the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at City College; Francisco Rivera-Batiz of Teachers College, Columbia University; and Roberto Agodini of Teachers College, Columbia University. It was made possible in part by funds provided by the Institute for Urban and Minority Education, the New York State Assembly, and the Aaron Diamond Foundation. The monograph is available from the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, The City College of New York, North Academic Center, Room 4-107, New York, NY 10031.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The statistics presented below are taken from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census of Population. While they are the most accurate numbers available, it is likely that not all Dominicans residing in the U.S. are included in them. While the Census seeks to capture both documented and undocumented immigrants, fear of detection is likely to prevent some undocumented immigrants from responding to Census requests for information.

General Dominican Population

Percentage of Population. Over half a million Dominicans reside in the United States. The vast majority, over 355,000, live in New York State. New Jersey has the second largest percentage, followed by Florida and Massachusetts.

Within the state of New York, New York City has the greatest concentration, with 65 percent of all Dominicans residing in the U.S. living there. Nearly half the Dominicans in New York City live in Manhattan.

During the 1980s the number of Dominicans in the City rose by 165 percent, from 125,000 to over 332,000. By comparison, the overall City population grew by only 3.5 percent. The increase in Dominicans, the greatest for any ethnic group, is largely the result of immigration: in 1990, nearly 73 percent of Dominicans living in New York were immigrants. Among Hispanic groups, only Puerto Ricans are more heavily represented in the City.

Average Age. The average age of the Dominican population in New York is remarkably young, even though it is getting slightly older on average: it rose from just under 27 years in 1980 to 28 years in 1990. By comparison, the average age of New Yorkers overall was 36 years in 1990.

Family Structure. The number of New York Dominican households

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headed by women, with no spouse present, rose sharply during the 1980s, from 34 percent in 1980 to nearly 41 per cent in 1990. Overall, about 22 percent of New York households were so configured in 1990, and the number was increasing at a less steep rate. The high percentage of their households that are headed by women is another reason for high poverty among Dominicans. Separated or divorced women, as well as single women, with children tend to have poverty rates higher than married couples, the result of their more difficult social and labor market situations.

School-Age Children

The substantial influx of immigrants from the Dominican Republic to New York City in the 1980s has been associated with a sharp increase in the number of Dominican children in public schools, since immigrants are young relative to the general population and likely to have school-age children. During the 1992-93 school year, over 26,000 Dominican students were eligible for New York's Emergency Immigrant Education Assistance, the largest ethnic group among all those receiving support. The total number of Dominican children in school is even higher than this figure, since those not eligible for such aid were not included in the Emergency Immigrant Education Census.

The rapid growth of the Dominican student population resulted in rapid school growth overall, and thus in school overcrowding, which is now very severe in some neighborhoods. For example,George Washington High School, one of the five most overcrowded high schools in New York, was operating at 153 percent of its capacity in 1992-93. Given that research demonstrates the adverse effect of overcrowding on the entire educational process, students attending overflowing schools are at a serious disadvantage, compounded by the additional stresses they experience due to their immigrant status. Moreover, since Dominican immigration to New York does not appear to be abating, the school overcrowding problem is likely to increase in the next few years.

MIGRATION

Significant migration of Dominicans to the United States started in the early 1960s, the result of a number of forces. Previously, Dominican Republican out-migration policies under the Trujillo regime had severely curtailed migration, but a number of forces led to increased immigration beginning 30 years ago. Political strife on the island fostered the desire to emigrate. Simultaneously, basic institutional changes in U.S. Immigration policy, such as those resulting from the U.S. Immigration Family Reunification Act, stimulated migration. Since the 1970s, the precarious economic climate in the Dominican Republic, especially in relation to that of the U.S., led large numbers of islanders to leave. As the unemployment rate in the Dominican Republic rose, and the U.S. rate declined, the incentive for Dominicans to move to the U.S. sharply increased.

In recent years, the island has experienced a profound depression. Presently, unemployment rates are high and real wages have declined precipitously. Not unexpectedly, Dominican emigration to the U.S. has increased markedly.

INCOME

The earnings data presented below are adjusted for inflation and are in 1989 dollars.

Household Income

Amount. The Dominican population in New York City has a significantly lower household income than that of New York families overall, and of African American and other Hispanic groups. In 1989 the average income for a Dominican household was $27,000, compared to $47,000 in general. The per-capita income demonstrates an even greater disparity: a little over $6,000 for Dominicans, which was only 27 percent of the average $16,000 income for each New Yorker overall. The reason for the wider per-capita difference is that Dominican households are typically larger than the average, by one person per household.

Growth. While the per-capita income of Dominicans in 1990 was quite low, it still represents a 7 percent increase over the previous decade: from $5,920 to $6,336. The increase for New Yorkers overall during that period was nearly 29 percent. That the Dominican per-capita income increase lagged so far behind those of other New York populations indicates that the relative economic status of Dominicans is actually deteriorating. The predominant cause of this, discussed fully below, is the concentration of Dominican workers in low-paying jobs and in industries whose presence in New York City is steadily decreasing.

Individual Earnings

Annual earnings of Dominicans over the 1980-90 period lagged substantially behind those of the general New York population, although they did increase slightly. However, the increase for Dominicans not only failed to narrow the gap between them and other New York groups, but it actually reflected a widening gap, given that other groups realized greater income growth.

Men. In 1989 Dominican men earned an average of just $15,000, compared with nearly $29,000 for all New York men and over $36,000 for white men. A decade earlier Dominican men earned just under $14,000, so their increase over the 1980-90 period was 8.3 percent. New York men overall increased their earnings by over 25 percent, while white men had an increase of 35 percent. Thus, in 1979 Dominican men made 48.3 cents for every dollar made by white men, but by 1989 they were making only 41.7 cents.

Women. In 1989 the average earnings of Dominican women were even less than those of men: just over $11,000. In contrast, New York women overall had earnings of over $20,000, and non-Hispanic white women earned more than $23,000. The earnings of Dominican women at the start of the decade were $10,000, compared with $16,000 for New York women overall and $17,000 for white women. The rate of earnings increase for Dominican women over 1980-90 was 13.6 percent, while for New York City women overall it was 25 percent

and for white women it was 35 percent. Thus, for every dollar earned by white women, Dominican women earned 57.4 cents in 1979, but only 48.3 cents in 1989. Not only did Dominican women earn less than Dominican men, but the gap between them and other ethnic groups grew wider than it did for men.

Causes of Low Earnings

Impact of Immigrant Status. Given that the income of the vast majority of Dominicans is low, within the group there is a significant gap between the native born and immigrants, one that is even greater than the gap between males and females. Further, the proportion of immigrants in the New York Dominican population is greater than the proportion in other ethnic groups, another reason why Dominican income ranks so low among New York population groups.

In general, the income growth for all immigrants in New York lagged behind overall growth between 1980-90, but, again, for Dominicans the gap was wider. The per-capita income gain of Dominican immigrants was 7 percent over the decade, compared with a gain of nearly 16 percent for immigrants overall and 33 percent for non-immigrant New Yorkers. Dominican immigrants, therefore, suffered doubly: from the economic forces that negatively affected all New York immigrants and the forces that affected the general Dominican population.

Additional Causes. There are several other reasons why Dominican earnings lag behind those of other New Yorkers: lower educational attainment, younger age, English language deficiency, recency of migration, among them. The most significant factor is lack of education, since educational attainment provides the greatest stimulus to getting and retaining a job with higher wages.

Poverty Level

The Dominican population had the highest poverty rate in New York City in 1990. Over 36 percent live in households under the poverty line, as compared with an overall New York household rate of just over 17 percent. Nearly one-half the Dominican children in New York live in poverty.

The Dominican poverty rate remained virtually the same between 1980-1990, although the rate for other New York City populations declined slightly, from 18 percent to 17.2 percent.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The lagging per-capita Dominican household income can be explained by the major shifts that occurred in the American labor market during 1980-90 that took a larger toll on Dominicans than on other groups. While certain groups gained substantially from the economic expansion of the 1980s, others, with characteristics typified by the Dominican population, were suffering from a collapsing labor market.

Labor Force Participation

Labor force participation statistics for Dominicans, unlike other economic indicators, do not indicate great differences between this population and others in New York City.

Men. A greater percentage of Dominican men than men from other ethnic groups and men in general in New York City were employed over the 1980-90 decade: 73 percent for Dominican men compared with 71 percent for men overall. However, the rate for Dominican men declined, from nearly 76 percent in 1980, while the overall rate rose slightly.

Women. In contrast, the employment rate for Dominican women increased between 1980-90, from 47 percent to 49 percent. But the improvement was not as great as that for New York City women overall, whose rate increased from 47 percent to 54 percent over the decade. Since the rates for Dominican women and women overall were nearly the same in 1980, the gap of 7 percentage points a decade later indicates the beginning of a gap between the two groups. The new gap is also related to the higher poverty rate of Dominican households, particularly those headed by women.

Unemployment

During 1980-90 the unemployment rate for Dominicans was higher than for other New York ethnic groups and for New Yorkers overall. It was three times higher than the rate for non-Hispanic whites. Moreover, while the unemployment rate rose for all New Yorkers over the decade, for Dominicans the increase was steeper.

Men. In 1990 the unemployment rate for Dominican men was nearly 16 percent, 7 percentage points higher than for New York men overall, and nearly triple the rate for white men. Over the 1980-90 period, the rate for Dominican men increased.

Women. The difference between the unemployment rate for Dominican women and other New York women was even greater. Dominican women's rate was over 18 percent in 1990, compared to an overall New York women's rate of 8 percent, and a 5 percent unemployment rate for white women. Even more troubling is the difference between the amounts of the increase over 1980-90 for Dominicans and the other New York female populations. During the decade, the unemployment rate for Dominican women nearly doubled, up from 9.5 percent. In contrast, the rate for New York women overall increased by 1.5 percentage points, and the rate for white women declined very slightly. Thus, the steep decline in employment for Dominican women explains the wide unemployment rate difference between the overall Dominican population and the rest of New York.

Causes. The high Dominican unemployment rate in New York constitutes one of the most significant barriers to the group's economic progress. The characteristics that generally cause unemployment (and, as discussed above, low wages)—low educational attainment, English language proficiency, recency of immigration, disability, and youth—are prevalent among the Dominican population. For example, among Dominicans, the unemployment rate of people without a high school diploma is over 18 percent; the immigrant rate, over 19 percent; the disabled rate, over 20 percent; and the limited English proficiency

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rate, over 18 percent. More than 30 percent of Dominicans between 16 and 19 years old are unemployed.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

It is well known that educational attainment is one of the key factors determining success in the labor market. Increased education raises worker productivity and leads to increased earnings and lower unemployment. Further, the labor market for poorly educated and low-skilled workers virtually collapsed during the 1980s, with higher education becoming a necessity to obtain greater earnings. Therefore, population groups with a high proportion of college-educated persons became richer, while groups largely comprised of workers who did not complete high school became poorer. The Dominican population in New York fits into the latter category.

In 1990 slightly fewer than half of New York Dominicans 25 years or older had completed high school. Only 8 percent had completed college. The high school completion rate for New Yorkers overall was nearly 80 percent, and nearly 30 percent had completed college. Among white New Yorkers the school completion rate was 89 percent and 58 percent, respectively.

As low as Dominican educational attainment still is, it is increasing, and the college completion rate more than doubled. In 1980, the group's high school completion rate was 28 percent, with less than 4 percent completing college. Still, the rate of increase for Dominicans is lagging behind that of other groups, thus increasing the gap between Dominicans and other New York populations in yet another area.

Immigrant status is to a great extent responsible for the increase in Dominican educational attainment, since in 1980 nearly three-quarters of immigrants failed to complete high school, while a decade later the completion rate was still slightly below 50 percent. The high school completion rate for native-born Dominicans remained nearly constant, while their college completion rate actually dropped from 16 percent to 12 percent between 1980-90.

JOB TYPE

Compared to the rest of the New York population, Dominicans occupy a higher proportion of unskilled, blue-collar jobs, a result of their lower educational attainment. In fact, they had the lowest proportion of professional and managerial jobs in the City: less than 10 percent, compared with 38.5 percent for whites. Further, their employment opportunities are decreasing as economic restructuring has sharply contracted blue-collar jobs and increased white-collar service sector employment. Between 1967 and 1989, for example, manufacturing employment declined by over 520,000 jobs. Moreover, the wages for the blue-collar jobs that continue to exist are falling relative to the higher-skilled jobs as employers compensate workers that they believe to be more valuable—those with technological expertise.

In particular, Dominicans had by far the highest proportion of persons employed in manufacturing in 1990: over 25 percent of its labor force total, with nearly twice as many women employed in the industry as men. But these high numbers are still a sharp decline from a decade earlier, when Dominicans held nearly half the manufacturing jobs in New York. The sharp decrease in manufacturing jobs is a primary cause of the high Dominican unemployment rate discussed above.

Dominicans have had an even higher concentration in the trade sector—over 27 percent in 1990, and up from 20 percent a decade earlier. But employment growth is lagging in this sector also, so future job opportunities will be limited. Other sectors with high Dominican employment are operators, laborers, and fabricators—all occupations with limited demand in New York, given the trend away from creation and perpetuation of low-skilled jobs.

Self-employment is often a means for immigrants to seek economic progress in the U.S. However, only 7 percent of Dominicans were self-employed in 1990, less than the 8.9 percent New York overall average.

Dominicans are also underrepresented in the New York City public sector labor force. Indeed, while Dominicans account for approximately 5 percent of the City population, they occupy only 2 percent of City jobs. Within the Dominican group, less than 10 percent of its members were public sector employees, as compared with 17 percent of the New York population overall.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving the economic status of Dominicans in New York City will require a major investment in education. Improving general adult literacy, and English language proficiency for the immigrant population, is essential. In addition, job training and workplace apprenticeships can help direct persons in the labor force away from low-paying jobs in collapsing industries and toward employment in sectors that offer greater long-term opportunities.

Increased access to higher education is essential for the Dominican population. With a labor market that heavily rewards college graduates, the admission and retention of Dominican youngsters in colleges is an imperative for economic progress. Public policies that support the educational efforts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would be of great value.

— Ramona Hernandez, Francisco Rivera-Batiz, and Roberto Agodini

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